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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 001650

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TAGS: PGOV PREL EWWT PM

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR LUNCH WITH CFZ GENERAL MANAGER NILDA QUIJANO

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM A. EATON FOR REASON 1.4D

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Colon Free Zone (CFZ) General Manager Nilda Quijano told Ambassador on 14 August 2006, that she is disappointed over the lack of GOP action to gain support for the Canal Referendum. A self-described "leftist radical," Quijano enjoys good support from Panama's business community and has been a staunch proponent of corporate social responsibility.
End summary.

FORMER LEFTIST ADVANCING IN "YES" CAMPAIGN

¶2. (C) Nilda Quijano, General Manager of the CFZ, told Ambassador over lunch on 14 August 2006 that she is disappointed with the poorly organized "Yes" campaign for the October 22 Canal referendum. She said she recently told President Torrijos that Hector Aleman, Torrijos' pointman for the Canal expansion referendum, was not doing anything to organize the vote. According to Quijano, Torrijos acknowledged Aleman's failure to deliver, but gave no sense that he planned on taking any action. Aleman was still nursing his wounds from his loss as Minister of Government and Justice, Quijano stated. (Note: Torrijos reshuffled his Cabinet last April and replaced Aleman with Olga Golcher. End Note.) Not willing to wait for the President to take action or for Aleman to engage in his task, Quijano said that she would use her "training" as a leftist radical to mobilize people and sell the Canal expansion project to average citizens in terms they would understand. Quijano claimed she had Torrijos' approval and planned to organize a network of women to get out the "yes" vote.

CORPORATE LEADER AND GOOD SAMARITAN, BUT NOT A POLITICO

¶3. (SBU) Working side-by-side with the GOP to develop a system that would organize the CFZ's financial and shipping documents and records, Quijano stated that she stays on top of reports and reviews them regularly to look for irregularities. Her mission in keeping the CFZ corruption-free had subjected her to political and economic pressures, but due to Torrijos' hands-off approach about the CFZ, she said that she had managed to fend off criticisms.

¶4. (SBU) Quijano has pushed CFZ businesses to contribute funds for schools, hospitals, and sports facilities in the

city in exchange for "branding" projects that spotlighted the CFZ companies and won them goodwill. Quijano said she was currently working on building a nursing home for the elderly and proudly spoke of her success in getting donations to fund computer centers and improve the city library.

¶5. (SBU) Although Torrijos reportedly offered Quijano a Cabinet position, she claimed she declined the offer because she was not interested in politics and because she believed her strengths lay elsewhere, not in party operations or leadership. Quijano only recently joined the PRD in order to appease others who carped to Torrijos about her political independence.

BIO COMMENT:

¶6. (C) Educated in the former USSR and fluent in Russian, Quijano has served as the Canal Free Zone (CFZ) General Manager since 2004. She was reportedly effective in her position as community relations chief at Manzanillo International Terminal (MIT) prior to her position at the CFZ. Quijano has complained about PRD pressures at the CFZ and has said that she is happy she still has her job at MIT. She told the Ambassador that MIT is holding her job for her, but hedged on whether she would ultimately return to MIT after serving at the CFZ.

EATON